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In *Between Specters of War and Visions of Peace*, Gerald Mara sets out to write a new history of Western political thought, centred around questions of war and peace and organized through five pairings of key figures from the philosophical canon. Eschewing not only a linear narrative of either progress or decline, but also the kind of contextualist historiography we have come to expect from proponents of the Cambridge School, Mara instead opts for an interpretive strategy that foregrounds the dialogical character of all political thought. What he means by “dialogue” requires further unpacking, but the gist is succinctly summarized in a programmatic statement: “The book engages multiple conversation partners across the tradition without situating them – as refuted, corrected, absorbed, or redeemed within any synoptic theorization.” (p. 3)

Put otherwise, all the authors discussed here, from Derrida to Plato, are treated as deserving our immediate attention, speaking to pressing concerns here and now and obliging us to react to their assertions. Beyond their status as stalwarts of the

philosophical canon, Mara thus argues that engaging with their positions on war and peace enables the contemporary reader to grapple with the complexity of current politics. This is so because the ideas reconstructed in the book reveal that “the persistence of both war and peace must be acknowledged as framing conditions for a political philosophy capable of assisting the critical judgments that citizens need to exercise” (p. 4).

The structure of the book is rather unconventional. As per his general intention to shun both progressive and declinist narratives, Mara avoids a chronological sequencing and proceeds by frequently pairing non-contemporaneous authors so as to contrast their substantive views on the relationship between war and peace: Chapter 1 reads in parallel Carl Schmitt’s and Jacques Derrida’s thoughts on enmity and friendship, while chapter 2 compares Thomas Aquinas’s and Niccolò Machiavelli’s ideas about political order and war. Mara then goes on, in chapter 3, to examine both Thomas Hobbes and Immanuel Kant, concentrating in particular on their divergent accounts of peace, before turning to G. W. F Hegel and Friedrich Nietzsche in chapter 4, teasing out both differences and affinities between their reflections on history and sociability. The final chapter is dedicated to an interpretation of Plato and Thucydides that presents them as defenders of a “philosophy that takes politics seriously and a narrative of politics that is open to philosophy” (p. 178). In concluding with Plato and Thucydides, we are therefore prompted to envisage the Ancient Greek debate around war and peace as the most persuasive alternative to “attempted closures” (p. 180) discovered in prior chapters.

In each of these five pairings, Mara embarks on (occasionally very) close readings of seminal texts, which he then seeks to relate to each other, sometimes in an antagonistic, sometimes in a mutualist spirit, demonstrating that a strict dichotomy

between war and peace is overly simplistic. Often, these attempts at reading together rival theorists yield productive results, such as in the confrontation between Schmitt and Derrida. Mara offers an insightful exegesis of both authors, but his critique of Derrida's concept of friendship is especially helpful, stressing that his "democracy to come" is ill-equipped to defend itself against non-democratic insurgencies.

However, the book's unusual structure also throws up some questions about the whole enterprise. Whereas contrasting Schmitt and Derrida makes a lot of sense, given that Derrida's account of friendship emerges from his deconstructive encounter with Schmitt, other pairings appear more controversial. In the confrontation between Aquinas and Machiavelli, for example, it is never fully explained whether and to what extent a hermeneutical bond exists between these two authors. Accordingly, the close readings of Aquinas and Machiavelli do not resonate with each to the same degree as the pairing of Schmitt and Derrida.

This discrepancy points to a deeper issue. Even though the deliberate rejection of systematicity is a methodological decision that can be vindicated, the book's lack of transparency with regard to the selection and pairing of authors makes it a difficult, and sporadically unsatisfying, read. Declining to follow the sequential order of things is an understandable choice that underscores the importance of taking Plato and Thucydides seriously, as valuable partners in deliberations around current political challenges. Yet, the benefits of such an interpretive strategy are somewhat diminished by Mara's refusal to clearly explain why he selected and paired those theorists rather than others.

In the chapter on Aquinas and Machiavelli, the tangle is exacerbated because later on Mara introduces Kant's figure of the "moral politician"; an idea that was in fact articulated as a response, during the Enlightenment period, to anti-Machiavellian

proposals for a principled politics. (Cavallar 1992, 344–62, 1993) So, in this and other cases, it should have been possible to delineate in some detail how patterns of influence have formed across the history of Western political thought and between the selected authors, without submitting to a linear story of progress/decline or to a contextualist historiography. This task strikes me as especially urgent given the book's consistent focus on controversies around war and peace, which have, as Mara submits, framed political theory throughout its history.

I want to raise two further points that I found challenging. The first is to do with the overall level of scholarly investment in the book. While the method of closely reading seminal texts has the advantage of insisting on the importance of meticulous reconstruction and nuanced interpretation, one cannot escape the impression of an uneven fidelity to primary sources, especially when it comes to Mara's portrayal of authors he disagrees with. Nowhere does this become more palpable than in the treatment of Jürgen Habermas, who is throughout the text exposed as a close ally of John Rawls, due to their joint commitment to "procedural understandings of democracy" (p. 12).

Now, it is surely right to maintain that Rawls and Habermas share a lot of common ground, especially when juxtaposed to their opponents, advocates of agonistic democracy (p. 13). But, without wishing to fetishize the non-trivial differences between Rawls and Habermas, it still seems problematic to assimilate their thoughts too much. On one occasion, Mara even intimates that both "understand just war as preserving or enhancing legitimate order" (p. 56), going on to sustain that claim through a short, but effective discussion of Rawls's *Law of Peoples*. No source at all is cited, though, to substantiate the notion that Habermas subscribes to Rawls's peculiar views, too. This is, I suspect, not incidental, for Habermas has never embraced the language of just war

in his writings on international relations.<sup>1</sup> As this example shows, Mara's level of scholarly care varies significantly between the authors he considers vital for the story he wants to tell and those he deviates from. In the end, this creates a skewed picture of the intellectual diversity and depth of today's debate.

My final point of contention relates to Mara's illuminating concept of dialogical political theory. "Dialogue" here signifies both an interpretive strategy of reading together various theorists, often across vastly different historical epochs; and a framework for comprehending the relationship between philosophy and politics. Concerning the method of pairing authors, I have already emphasized one potential weakness of this approach: unless the criterion for selecting individual theorists is explicitly justified and consistently applied, an air of randomness hangs over the entire project, its admirable learning notwithstanding.

Yet, the second meaning of dialogical political theory also merits attention. In highlighting the similarities between "textual interpretation and critical citizenship" (p. 202) (without collapsing them into each other), Mara pleads for a political theory that aspires to make a difference in public affairs. This strikes me as a powerful declaration that would warrant further investigation. *Between Specters of War and Visions of Peace*, though, is almost exclusively concerned with the painstaking textual interpretation of some of the most researched authors in the Western canon, while paying scant attention to actual practices of critical citizenship. Here, the contrast with a competing account of dialogical political theory is stark: just like Mara, James Tully believes that the relationship between philosophy and politics ought to be modelled on ideals of "reciprocal elucidation and mutual benefit" (Tully 2008, 37). Yet, Tully

<sup>1</sup> The closest we get to a systematic reflection on just war is in Habermas's pronouncements as a public intellectual during the Kosovo war. See: (Habermas 1999)

displays a much stronger attentiveness to actual struggles over recognition, which consequently enhances the dialogical aspect of his political theory.

In sum, *Between Specters of War and Visions of Peace* will often be a rewarding read, especially for those interested in the authors Mara concentrates on. But, for this reader at least, the book also fails to comprehensively deliver on its ambitious promise to reorient our thinking about the history of political thought.

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